

ORAL HISTORY AND ARCHIVES: THE CASE IN FAVOR

By Derek Reimer

Si en tant qu'archivistes, notre tâche primordiale est de permettre la constitution de fonds d'archives les plus complet possible, il ne faudra pas se surprendre de notre propos. De nos jours malgré cette aspiration légitime, la réalité est parfois bien différente. On ne peut nier le fait que les archives canadiennes sont avant tout composée des fonds d'archives d'hommes politiques, d'hommes d'affaires et d'organismes bien en vue, bien structurés, tous n'étant qu'une réalité de notre société. Mais l'autre versant de la montagne est moins ou pas connu. Comment peut-on y remédier. Comment combler cette lacune. Les causes de ce déséquilibres sont légion mais on peut les résumer en un mot: la sélection. Changer, élargir les modes de sélection et leurs critères est un premier pas. Inclure l'histoire orale comme source à part entière du mandat des institutions d'archives en est un autre. Les effets de l'une étant compensé par les effets de l'autre. Voilà que notre but, notre aspiration à une documentation toujours d'avantage complète peut devenir réalité. Le bien-fondé des archives sera jugé dans le futur sur les fonds qu'elles détiennent. Ne pas y inclure les fonds d'histoire orale serait non seulement faire abstraction de leur importance mais aussi nier aujourd'hui leur impacte sur la recherche de demain.

We can all remember going to the "fun house" at the fair. Part of every one was the hall of mirrors. The mirrors in this hall were curved and warped in a way that would curve, warp and distort your reflection. One moment your head would expand grotesquely with bugging eyes and enormous ears. The next moment your legs would shrink to twigs and your feet would become postage stamps. These mirrors, with their massive exaggerations and distortions are, for me, the so-called "mirrors of Canada's past" which is now preserved by Canadian archives -- mirrors of our past reflecting a grossly distorted view of our country, its institutions and its history.

If these mirror/archives were distorting our reflections in a random fashion, this one enlarging the hands but shrinking the feet, the next shrinking the torso while enlarging the legs, I might not be very concerned, for the aggregate view might be quite accurate. The problem is, however, that each of them is distorting in the same way, grossly exaggerating the head and top part of the corpus of the past while shrinking badly, if not eliminating altogether, the main parts of the body.

My belief is that as custodians of the mirror, archivists should be actively working to diminish the distortions in it. One of the best ways of doing this is through the use of oral history.

Stated in generalities, the current holdings of Canadian archives are the archives of white, middle and upper class, European adult men. They are the archives of politics and politicians, business, large labour organizations

and to a very large degree, the archives of bureaucracy.

Of course there are exceptions to this general condition. Most large archives in the country have a letter or two of Louis Riel or a collection of papers and photos of a figure such as Nellie McClung or even the records or reminiscences of a failed farmer or businessman. But the great preponderance of records are as I have described them. Furthermore, I am disturbed by the growing trend among the larger public archives in the country, including my own, to place an inordinately high priority on the records of the parent body (sponsoring institution) to the detriment of non-government archives, including oral history.

Oral history can digress the imbalance in the record by giving a voice to the unheard; by giving a place in posterity to the previously anonymous; by giving an image to the previously invisible. Ethnic groups, native people, women and children can be given a documentary basis in oral history which would otherwise be non-existent.

Archivists need to examine more carefully the implications of their work. While most of us would quickly dismiss the notion of the possibility of objective and value free history, saying that all history reflects the point of view of its writer, many of us still feel that the record which we so carefully preserve and make available is neutral stuff without its own animus. In the same way that the splitting of the atom was not simply an interesting problem in physics, the selected, conserved, catalogued and made-available record has its own subjective meaning.

This is true for at least three reasons. First, the record, no matter how complete, is not a replica of the event or events described. The record is not the event. Second, even of this imperfect record, there is incomplete preservation. Third, there is the matter of selection and retention. The vast majority of records selected and retained in Canadian archives reflect executive decision-making and executive action by elites. The decision to retain is made not in a vacuum, coolly and without ideological ramifications. When selecting these records as archivist or using them as an historian, we need to ask only "What information is contained in these records?" but also, "Whose purpose is being served by this record and what does its selection and retention say about the archivist who handles it and the institution which preserves it and makes it available?".

These are precisely the sorts of questions and criticisms that have been made about oral history. They are legitimate questions which deserve answers. My objection is that archivists and historians have been applying a double standard to oral history. The questions and criticisms are directed against oral sources but are rarely if ever applied to other sorts of documentary evidence.

Archivists who want to refuse the legitimacy of oral history as a method of historical documentation are acting as the gatekeepers of the bastion of conservatism, elitism and privilege. Archivists who refuse to participate fully in the process of oral history are helping to create an air of illegitimacy around oral records.

To get some idea of the opportunities that are being missed this very day by our narrow-minded collecting mandates consider how interesting we would find a sample of verbatim interviews with UEL settlers in Canada or, late 19th century Newfoundland sealers or Irish immigrants to Canada fleeing the potato famine or, Chinese workers on the CPR. What use could Pierre Berton have made of an interview with a private soldier from the War of 1812 or General Brock's batman.

Oral history, as we know it, has only been practised in Canada for 25 years or so. Twenty years (or 50 years) from now the historical community will be pointing the finger or culpability at us and saying, "Why did the archivists of the 1980s do so little interviewing?" My contention is that it is by our collections that we will be known in the future, not by the purity of archival theory or the niceness with which we can distinguish between the true work of an archivist as opposed to a collector of oral documents. As R. W. Emerson, the American philosopher said: "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds". To my archival colleagues I say, if you can't stand calling the recording of first person reminiscences and stories the work of an archivist, then for those moments when you are recording oral history call yourselves something else. Call yourselves "historical researchers" or "cultural conservators" but don't lose the opportunity of recording vanishing resources because of some arbitrary linear subdivision of the world of knowledge which says that archivists do not participate in the creation of records.

The accusation that in recording oral history the archivist is creating the record, not simply selection, preserving and making it available, needs constant rebuttal. The "record" already exists in the mind of the interviewee. The interviewer archivist is simply giving it tangible form. The activity may be thought of as parallel to "conservation" where the ephemeral record in whatever medium, is preserved.

We must also rebut, with equal vigour the notion that the archivist is actually an objective non-participant, the mere custodian of the record and that by taking part in the interview, he or she loses this objectivity. My response to this is: Think of the questions of the archivist/interviewer as the process of "selection" from the totality of the record -- the interviewee's memory. Not only that, but at least the interviewer/archivist's "selection" is honestly presented and there for all to see. The interviewer's part of the interview process is recorded as faithfully as the answers of the subject. The selection criteria for other types of records (textual records) is far less evident, but there nonetheless. The question of whether or not the archivist should be the interviewer/researcher or merely the keeper of the record is silly. The one who makes the record is the interviewee. The one to give it tangible form should be the one with his or her finger on the "record" button. The opportunity to give permanent life to this memory/experience may not come again. Whether these people call themselves archivist, historian, anthropologist, folklorist or sociologist is immaterial.

How our society will conceive its history is dependent upon the evidence that archivists have accumulated and made available. This act of conception always follows the path of richest evidence. It is no accident that Canadian history has been federal, political and constitutional. Archivists, as much as historians, have lead it there by their collection policies. Oral history and

other more "popular" media, such as photography, have helped in the development of the so-called "new social history". Paul Thompson, in his excellent book, The Voice of the Past, expressed this very well when he said:

[Oral history] can give back to the people who made and experienced history, through their own words, a central place....

Reality is complex and many sided; and it is the primary merit of oral history that to a much greater extent than most sources it allows the original multiplicity of standpoints to be re-created.

What then should Canadian archives be doing in the field of oral history? It is, of course, up to each to decide, however I give the example of the Provincial Archives of British Columbia where in addition to being "archivists" we are also historical research generalists. We all participate in the three basic elements of our program:

1. We are archivists who select, conserve, document and make available sound recordings.
2. We conduct oral history research and interviews within specialized subject areas.
3. We operate what I feel is one of the most effective diffusion programs of any Canadian archives through the Sound Heritage Series.

Historians, genealogists and other users of archives must work from the evidence. As archivists, it is our job to provide as balanced and complete a set of records and documents as possible. Our sponsoring agencies are the powerful and well-organized elements in our society (banks, churches, large corporate bodies such as universities, but especially governments). To take the view, as many do, that the first and overriding priority of the large public archives in Canada should be to their sponsoring agencies is to disregard the history of the mass of ordinary people whose personal experiences have nothing to do with the exercise of power and everything to do with the effects of it.

I am not suggesting that archivists should abandon their role as the keepers of the orderly records of governments and other institutions and rush into the field, tape recorders at the ready, to record the basis for a revisionist history. The records of our sponsoring agencies are important and deserve the best care that we can give them as professional archivists. What I am saying, however, is that we must be continually aware of the ideological implications of what we are collecting and that we take seriously our wider cultural responsibilities of collecting, preserving and making available a better-balanced record of the past -- including oral history.